

Tracing the Gender Gap in the Politics of Assam: A Study Based on Women Representation

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Abstract

Equal representation of both men and women in decision-making is crucial for bolstering the democratic setup in a nation like India. However, since India's independence the representation of women in politics has remained unequal. Significantly, the Constitution of India guarantees equal opportunity for participation in politics for both men and women. Despite this, women are literally underrepresented in both Parliament and legislative assemblies. In the case of Assam, at present, out of 126 members of the legislative assembly, only 5 are women. However, from 1952 to the 2021 Assembly Election of Assam, women's representation was not more than 9%. Undoubtedly, it is only because of gender inequality, which plays a crucial role in Assamese society. More or less, Assamese society is governed by some traditional practices for which gender bias is still present. Taking into account, this paper tries to highlight the following objectives.

1. To understand the concept of gender.
2. To explore the causes of gender gap in Assamese society.
3. To analyse the women's representation in the legislative assembly election and Lok Sabha election.
4. To highlight the link in between gender gap and Women's representation in Assam.

Keywords: Gender, Representation, Women, Disparity, Equality

Introduction:

Among the states in the Northeast, Assam has one of the biggest populations. As per the 2011 census, the state's total population is 31205576. There are 15939443 males and 15266133 females in all (Government Census Report, 2021). It is 958 for the sex ratio. In spite of that women in Assam are more liberated than those in other states of northeast. Some of the problems that affect women in other regions of India, like sati, female foeticide, and illiteracy, have not affected them. Even though, women continue to be viewed as inferior to men in all areas of life including social, political, economic, and educational. Historically, it is seen that women have played a very important role in various social movements in Assam, but their representation in national as well as state politics is very unimpressive. At the same time, Assamese women have consistently been excluded from positions of power, a pattern that is seen in politics. Women in Assam have been unable to achieve any remarkable positions in politics since the independence. Despite, there are certain women who are hardly able to participate in the politics of Assam. Engrossingly, only one woman named Syeda Anowara Taimur was the first and last woman chief minister in Assam from the independence of India till now (<https://en.wikipedia.org>). Some academicians and social

scientists believe that the gender disparity that permeates Assamese society is the sole cause of the problem.

Concept of Gender

The term 'Gender' was used by Oklay in 1971 to make distinction between men and women. The concept of 'Gender' is much wider than sex. It has gained significant and consistent popularity since 1980 (Haig, 2004), sex and gender are repeatedly used alternatively in academic and informal contexts. Even so, the cultural, political, social, and economic traits that possibilities that come with being a woman or a man are all included in gender. Men are considered to be masculine, while women are considered to be feminine. Sex by itself does not constitute a biological species, nor are men and women. Therefore, it may be argued that gender is a more inclusive term than sex. Gender is a socio-cultural expression of particular characteristics and roles associated with specific groups of people according to their sex and sexual orientation. Gender refers to the socially constructed roles, behaviours, activities, and traits that a certain society considers appropriate for men and women. It suggests that male and female identities are socially constructed. It is the acknowledgment of biological disparities in society. Gender is a concept used in the social sciences to describe the social status distinctions between men and women. The idea of gender is viewed as an intellectual tool used to subjugate women in patriarchal societies. Hence, Gender becomes a crucial element of society in every developing country.

According to Contemporary feminist scholars' gender is a social and political construct, related to and not determined by biological sex differences (Padia, 2006).

Simone de Beauvoir opinions that "one is not born a woman; one becomes a woman. Beauvoir claims that it is a whole process by which femininity is constructed by society. (Beauvoir, 1974). Ann Oklay regards gender as a matter of culture. It refers to the social classification of men and women into 'masculine' and 'feminine' (Oakley, 1985).

Gender disparity, which is at the forefront of guiding various negative sequels i.e. the gender gap between men and women in every society. According to the World Gender Gap report 2025, India's rank at 131 out of 148 countries that was published by World Economic Forum World Gender Gap Report, (2025). It is assessed on the basis of four prime areas i.e. economic participation and opportunities, educational attainment, health and survival, and political empowerment (World Gender Gap Report, 2025). Hence, India scored 64.1 percent which is two steps down from the previous position. However, educational attainment, one of the prime areas of assessment, got 97 percent, which carries a positive dimension to women's literacy. It is uninspiring that the rate of women's representation in parliament is unpredictably dropping from 14.7 percent to 13.8 percent; that really depicts a very reproving picture of the political empowerment of women. However, various remarkable initiatives have been taken by the Government of India to reduce gender gap i.e. education, political, health and security and economics. The Government of India has taken some significant measures to ensure political empowerment of women, i.e., one-third reservation of seats for women representatives in parliament, state legislative assemblies, and local bodies (panchayats and municipalities). Gender budgeting is also a paramount of strength for women in the field of politics, which was implemented by the Government of India in 2005.

Gender gap in the politics of Assam:

Assam is known for its cultural diversities and for being the ground of multi-ethnic groups. But the women in this area are still grappling with gender inequality in the field of politics. A little representation of

women is seen in the parliament of India as well as the state legislative assembly of Assam. In 2024 parliamentary election, women representation is only 14 percent (Lok Sabha Election Result, 2024). On the other hand, State Legislative Assembly election 2021, women representation is only 5 percent. All of us know that the constitution of India also guarantees gender equality in politics. In this regard, an attempt has been made to find out the underlying causes that assist in alive gender disparity and generate a gender gap in the politics of Assam. Political representation in decision making will increase administrative responsibilities of women which ensure the competency of women as a decision maker. Politics is an exercise of power and denotes the functioning of a whole array policies of public institutions and forms, which are involved in moulding the lives of people by way of decisions, which influence their interpersonal relationships. (Sinha, 2006). Thus, those norms that have been informally characterized as masculine have been the foundation for the construction and moulding of politics throughout history. The division of labour between males and females always remains a key ingredient that has been shaped by society and is also a prominent factor of less political participation of women.

Table-1

Year wises list of women's participation and representation in Lok Sabha Election from 1952 to 2024

Year	Total Seat	No. of total candidate	Male candidate	Female candidate	No. of elected women candidate
1951-52	10	40	38	02	01
1957	10	31	29	02	02
1962	12	41	38	03	02
1967	12	47	45	02	01
1972	14	78	75	03	01
1977	14	40	37	03	02
1980	14	07	05	02	00
1985	14	89	87	02	00
1989	-	-	-	-	-
1991	14	167	159	08	00
1996	14	137	128	09	00
1999	14	115	106	09	02
2004	14	116	110	06	00
2009	14	169	158	11	02
2014	14	183	164	19	02
2019	14	167	152	15	01
2024	14	142	130	12	01

Source: Election Commission India

The table shows a clear picture of the gender gap in women's participation in politics. In the first Lok Sabha Election in 1951-52, the rate of women's participation was 5%. In 1957, it was 6.45 percent, which is higher than the previous year. In the 1962 and 1977 elections, women's participation rate is almost similar, at 7.32 and 7.5, respectively. The lowest rate of participation was 2.25, which was seen in both the elections of 1980 and 1985. However, the rate of women's participation was slightly hiked during

2014 election with 10.38 %. It is seen that in all the Lok Sabha elections since the independence of the country, the Assamese women's participation in politics as decision makers is more distressing. Nevertheless, the percentage of women elected to the Lok Sabha is between 0.2 and 0.4. There were no women elected to the Lok Sabha from Assam in the elections of 1980, 1985, 1991, 1996, and 2004.

Table-2

Women's participation and representation in Legislative Assembly Election of Assam from 1952 to 2021

Year	Total candidate	Male candidate	Female candidate	No of elected women candidate
1951-52	458	457	01	01
1957	307	301	06	05
1962	409	405	04	04
1967	493	486	07	05
1972	478	466	12	08
1978	938	916	22	01
1983	471	468	03	02
1985	1133	1104	29	05
1991	1657	1607	50	05
1996	1228	1183	45	07
2001	916	861	55	11
2006	997	927	70	13
2011	981	896	85	15
2016	1190	1099	91	08
2021	946	870	76	05

Source: Election Commission India

The above-mentioned table highlights the Assamese women's representation in Assam Legislative Assembly Election since independence as decision maker which displays a really disappointing picture of less representation. As compared to 1951, when it was only 0.93%, the 2011 Assam Legislative Assembly Election created a benchmark for the Assamese women with the rate of 11.90%. Notwithstanding, again women's incapacibilities have been shown in the 2021 election, which leads to the gender gap in the politics of Assam. Significantly, the researchers and the conscious citizens of the state have claimed that the political parties, national as well as regional, are also not gender neutral. That is why a minimal representation of women is selected by the parties.

Reasons behind the Gender Gap in politics:

However, the reasons behind the gender gap always varied from one society to another. Assamese women had played a significant role during freedom struggle with men. Despite these women are found to be unequal and marginalised in politics. It is also seen that the Assamese women have always valued the traditions and customs that prevailed in the society but they never maintain a distance from politics. The last assembly election of Assam indicated a positive trend where 65 percent of women voters cast their valuable votes. The main reasons for the gender gap in the politics of Assam are:

Social System

Like other parts of India, Assam belongs to the patriarchal system where men's domination over women is a key concept. It means men enjoys more power and authority than women. All the important and decisive powers are in the hand of male counterpart i.e. financial, political, and property-related. Women's work is confined mainly within the family giving birth to child, looking after them; etc. those are unpaid and less importance than men's. Nonetheless, social system of the Assamese society has ignored the importance of women's role as decision maker.

Societal norms and values

Societal norms and values remain dominant in Assamese society. Social norms are always unwritten, and they have a deep impact on shaping an individual's behaviour in society. It guides an individual on how he/she should behave, interact, and maintain social order. All the societal norms shape women as inferior to men. Social values are the sets of beliefs, i.e. honesty, kindness, respect, and responsibilities. However, these societal norms and values determine the rules of the society, which are predominantly male centric.

Gender biasness of the topmost leaders and political parties:

It is obvious that not only the topmost leaders but also the political parties are never free from gender bias. Pertinently, men always remain submissive in nature toward women. That is why, they never expect women to have superiority and dominant positions in any sphere of life. Their expectations are always predetermined and based on the traditional mindset and thinking.

Lack of financial independence:

Lack of financial independence is one of the causes that deter women from politics. Most of the women are dependent on their husbands or family members. That is why, their choices are limited and restricted, and they are chosen by the relatives.

Educational backwardness:

Educational backwardness is not only an issue of the state but also a global concern. Compulsory education for women has become a showcase in rural areas. However various underlying factors contribute to accessing to and completing the education; it is a matter of disparity. The school dropout rate for girls is higher than that of boys. That is the reason women are far away from joining politics due to their educational background.

Fear of Violence:

Violence is always vulnerable; it may be election-centric or common in nature. Therefore, women are always petrified and try to keep up a distance from it. Otherwise, they steered clear of the controversy and contestation.

Pre-eminent political background:

Now a days, politics has become a family-run business both in national and state politics. In Assam, almost all the women representatives are from political background. They have a compulsion to join politics by reason of their family background.

Conclusion:

Women have played a vital role in the formulation of policies and programs of the governmental institutions; barring a few, they have seldom played an effective role. However, they have been marginalized in politics and the decision-making process. The decision makers, the majority of whom are male, are formulating the policies for their own interest (Sinha, 2006). In fact, women form the largest minority group, almost 50 percent of the country's population, but are hardly visible in both national and

state politics. They are the silent minority, unheard and unseen in the political process. But in a democratic country, equal representation is must needed for its success.

The gender gap in politics has appeared since the independence of the country. Political parties never take it as a serious issue of concern. Nevertheless, the article emphasizes the gender gap in political representation of women in Assam and tries to analyse it with proper facts and figures. It gives an image of gender disparity in women's representation, which looks at the gender gap in electoral politics in Assam. However, gender disparity is rampant in Assamese society. It is because patriarchy and societal norms pamper it earnestly. It's obvious to mention here that the role of gender identity is more significant in politics. Gender identity makes sure there is gender-based representation in politics and also shapes and protects an individual's rights and interests on the basis of their gender. Taking into consideration, political awareness amongst the women and encourage them to play a part is called-for.

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